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SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS: ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIR DISCUSSES
PREPARATIONS

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Summary

¶1. (U) On Thursday, January 21, 2010, Poloff met with the Chair of Lesotho's Independent Electoral Commission to discuss Lesotho's upcoming local government elections. The Chair doesn't expect elections to occur before the end of April. She also affirmed that opposition parties and the ruling LCD party have been happy with recent meetings to discuss the local government elections. Preparations are coming along, but a major holdup is a controversy over the "reservations," or seats reserved for women, and some opposition parties have threatened to boycott the elections.

Preparations underway, though election date is still uncertain

¶2. (U) The IEC is responsible for setting dates for local government elections. The next elections are supposed to occur before April 30. However, the IEC is concerned that elections may not be possible until later, and the Chair suggested that there may be a need to amend the law to allow extension of the local councils, to allow time to come to agreement over certain issues, such as the reservation of 30% of electoral divisions (a unit of local government) for women. In the meantime, the IEC is recruiting and hiring temporary staff for voter education, as display clerks, and as paying clerks. Temporary employees are normally only hired for three months at a time, and while these employees have been particularly useful during the three recent by-elections, the IEC is uncertain how long they can keep them. For now, they hope to use the temporary employees to educate the public about local government elections. Though local government elections have been held since 2005, many Basotho still do not understand their purpose.

Reserved seats for women contentious, but election boycott unlikely

13. (U) Like every election since independence, the current election is not without conflict. Right now, conflict is centered on the controversial issue of "reservations," or the 30% of electoral divisions which are reserved for women. On December 15 and again on January 19, the IEC met with political parties to discuss local government elections. In December, the IEC presented its ideas about the reservations, but requested input from all political parties. In December, one group refused to consider keeping affirmative action at all. The IEC chair was adamant that affirmative action for women is still needed, pointing out that even in areas where women are in the majority, they still elect men to be their leaders. At the January meeting, no one brought any ideas to the table, but some party leaders mentioned a compromise approach which has been used in Tanzania. The IEC Chair expects the parties to follow up on this suggestion.

14. (U) Another area of potential conflict is the possibility of a boycott. Some opposition parties had been planning to boycott the local government elections due to the unresolved issue of proportional representation parliamentary seats in the 2007 national election. However, those parties were all present at the January meeting. At the first local government elections in 2005, many people decided to stand as independents against their parties' wishes, because the opposition parties boycotted. The

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2005 boycott caused a lot of confusion, and did not help the opposition parties' cause, so it seems unlikely that the parties would boycott again, despite their threats to do so.

Delimitation exercise received positively

15. (U) The IEC is not unhappy that elections might be postponed because they are currently in the middle of a delimitation exercise to redraw the constituencies for the national election in 2012. The delimitation exercise was based on geographic factors, communities of interest like established neighborhoods, and keeping administrative areas confined within a district. After redrawing the boundaries, the IEC displayed the suggested boundaries, and asked the public to comment. Then they analyzed all the comments they received, and began looking for "hot spots" where there might be trouble with the new boundaries. Once all the "hot spots" have been identified, they will visit those areas and meet with the community to get a better idea of their concerns. The initial response to the exercise has been positive, supporting the IEC Chair's claim that they have done a pretty good job on "human relationships" during this exercise. They've had 562 comments so far, though not all very constructive.

IEC confident in the Christian Council of Lesotho's negotiation

¶6. (SBU) The SADC Troika is expected to visit Lesotho again within the next few weeks to discuss the ongoing controversy over the distribution of parliamentary seats following the 2007 national elections. The last time the Troika came to Lesotho, the IEC told them that they have confidence in the Christian Council of Lesotho process, and believes that they should proceed in a supportive manner. The IEC Chair stated that negotiators should help the LCD to move away from their present position, because both parties need to come to the middle. The IEC would like to see the GOL use the 2007 experience to tighten the law so that this confusion is stopped. They have submitted recommendations to the Ministry of Justice.

One expert, two calculations, one fine mess

¶7. (SBU) According to the Chair, Lesotho's electoral model is still new, and it is normal that it continues to face challenges as the country adjusts to it. For example, the emergence of alliances in 2007 was new, and no one knew how to deal with it. The GOL invited Professor Jorgen Elklit of Denmark to come to the Kingdom and do the calculation for the assignment of proportional seats. Initially his calculations were presented publicly, and everyone accepted them. However, he later did an alternative calculation, which he presented to the IEC Chair privately. Somehow word got to the opposition, who wanted the seats redistributed using this alternative calculation. This led to the current stalemate and continuing disagreement about the proportional seats.

Comment

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¶8. (SBU) Post concurs with the Chair's assessment that preparations will not be complete in time for April elections. We have heard through a contact at the Lesotho Council of NGOs that if elections cannot be held before May, they will be scheduled for September, as the harsh winter weather will not allow for voting in the remote rural regions where most of the population lives.

¶9. (SBU) The idea of two calculations, one of which was shared with the Chair of the IEC, was new to Post. It appears that the former IEC chair knew of Professor Elklit's second thoughts, but wanted to hide them, to protect his own reputation. It is unclear how the second calculation was leaked to the opposition. This does explain why the GOL is hesitant to include Professor Elklit in any further mediation on the elections. Post will be following this issue closely in the lead-up to local government

elections, and will inform the Department if there are any
developments.
NOLAN